

Joy

Essay 16 in the series “Ode to Joy”

“Rejoice in the Lord always.
 I will say it again: Rejoice!
 Let your gentleness be evident to all.
 The Lord is near.
 Do not be anxious about anything,
 but in everything,
 by prayer and petition,
 with thanksgiving,
 present your requests to God.
 And the peace of God,
 which transcends all understanding,
 will guard your hearts and your minds
 in Christ Jesus.”

– Philippians 4:4-7

This is such a wonderful text that we do not want to over-analyze it.

But before we consider this text let’s note in passing the two verses just before it, a fascinating, intriguing window into life in the church at first, specifically into life in the church at Philippi. Paul pleads with two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree with each other in the Lord. Then he asks someone he calls “loyal yokefellow” or “true companion” to help them. We don’t know who this “true companion” is. Speculation abounds. Gordon Fee in his commentary on Philippians suggests the most likely candidate is Luke who, evidence suggests, did spend substantial time in Philippi. The truth is, we don’t know.

Nor do we know what the conflict was between Euodia and Syntyche. We don’t know because they did know, and Paul had no reason to be specific. All of which reminds us that this is a letter and should be understood as a letter. All we know is that Paul cared about Euodia and Syntyche. They had “contended at [his] side in the cause of the gospel.” They were Paul’s co-workers. They were in the line of strong women in the Macedonian churches that went back to the businesswoman Lydia with whom the church in Philippi began as recorded back in Acts 16. And in fact if we follow the Acts account everywhere Paul went in the region of Macedonia – first Philippi, then Thessalonica and Berea – there ended up being prominent women in the churches. It seems to have been a Macedonian pattern. Unlike in Greece – think, Corinth – women in Macedonia played large roles in public affairs, conducted business, erected their own tombs, even had monuments erected to them. Paul’s off-handed way of speaking of Euodia and Syntyche reminds us then that leadership patterns for women in the church at first were more diverse than we might suppose.

For our purposes, what I most want us to see is the pain Paul feels over Euodia and Syntyche. And just then he breaks into, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

Though there be conflict and disagreement,
“Rejoice in the Lord always.”

Though Paul himself is under arrest in Rome,
“Rejoice in the Lord always.”

Though Epaphroditus almost died,
“Rejoice in the Lord always.”

Though some preach Jesus out of selfish ambition,
“Rejoice in the Lord always.
I will say it again: Rejoice!”

Though some seek to undermine the gospel
by taking people back to the Torah,
“Rejoice in the Lord always.”

Though Paul is being poured out like a drink offering (2:17),
“Rejoice in the Lord always.”

Though many live as enemies of the cross of Christ,
“Rejoice in the Lord always.”

Though Philippian Christians suffer for their faith – in a city so Roman, so Caesar-centered, they could not avoid opposition – still, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

“Let your gentleness be evident to all.” To whom? Likely to those who oppose them. Whatever they may do, let your gentleness, your meekness, your restraint, be evident to all.

“The Lord is near” which can be either temporal as in “The Lord is coming soon” which many believed or spatial as in “The Lord is right here.” The Lord is always right here, present in every breath we take.

“Do not be anxious about anything,” but in everything, pray, express gratitude, see the gifts of God all around you, present your requests to God. “And the peace (the SHALOM) of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” So it is to be in the kingdom of God which is after all not a matter of eating and drinking, not a matter of Torah, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (this from Romans 14:17).

And so we have this peace that comes from knowing that in God we live and move and have our being; that God is always with us, within us and all around; that as we empty ourselves, God fills us; and that in all things God is working for our good. Whatever you are going through, as dark, as frightening, as painful as it is, God is working for your good. So, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

This is the theme that runs all through this letter. And now when I read this letter I find Paul always showing us the way back to joy: by keeping his perspective (“But what does it matter?” 1:18); by his complete lack of fear of dying (“I desire to depart and be with Christ,” 1:23); by his emphasis on our emptying ourselves and taking the very nature of a servant (2:6-7); by his absolute confidence that at the name of Jesus one day every knee will bow (2:10); by his ability to forget what is behind and press on (3:14); by his willingness to leave differences of viewpoint to God (3:15) and on and on. And so the music that plays in my mind as I read Paul, yes, in Philippians, but now also elsewhere, comes from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, from that great choral finale, the “Ode to Joy,” written by the German poet, playwright and historian Friedrich Schiller in 1785, but best known from Beethoven’s Ninth, and for us as the basic melody for the hymn, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.”

The leitmotif of the Philippian letter from beginning to end is joy, joy when Paul prays (1:4-5), joy though others act out of selfish ambition (1:15-18), joy under house arrest knowing that whatever happens will turn out for his deliverance (1:19), joy even though his life is being poured out like a drinking offering (2:17). And now Paul writes, “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (3:1; 4:4).

So whereas once I would have read this book looking for clues to this doctrine or that doctrine – to the intermediate state of the dead, to the deity of Christ, to matters of church government, whatever – now I read it for the joy. Here is a man who has found his joy. He’s found the state called beatitude. You even see it many years earlier in his first days in Philippi when Paul and Silas were stripped, severely flogged, and thrown into the back cell of the city jail with their feet fastened in stocks. It was around midnight. It’d been dark for hours. And Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners are listening, more astonished than annoyed. Where does one find the faith, the jazz, the chutzpah, to sing songs in the cold and dark of a prison at midnight? Is there any way you can imagine yourself doing this? I for one am thrown off over and over by a lot less than this. Where does one find this inner strength?

It comes down, I believe, to seeing the world as Paul saw it – a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God, an enchanted and enchanting world surrounded by grace, filled already with eternity, his own life now filled to the measure of all the fullness of God, deeply aware of how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, the divine flow all around him and within him, even when persecuted, even in jail around midnight. So Paul lives radiantly. Because of what he now knows. He knows that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18). He knows that grace reigns (Romans 5:12ff.), that in the end, mercy

triumphs over judgment, wildly extravagant, heart-changing mercy. He knows – he knows this as a fact – that somehow in all things, in absolutely all things, God works for the good of those who love him, that somehow – whether it’s clear to us or not – our lives are working out as they should (Romans 8:28). And he knows that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, not trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or a little deprivation, or danger (Romans 8:31-39). So Paul could live joyfully, radiantly joyfully, radiantly, unshakably joyfully.

In his letter to the Philippians he tells us over and over how and why. There are moments in this letter that one can almost hear Paul shout out as the male voice does in “Ode to Joy”, “Freude,” in German. In English, “Joy!” To this we are called. For this we were born.

– Dale Pauls